Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Regional Mobilities, Technology and the Status of Myth in Africa: Retrieving Musical/Creative Codes in KwaZulu-Natal before Colonialism

by Thokozani N Mhlambi | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT This article tracks my intellectual journey in trying to understand the role played by craft specializations before the colonial era in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), which is the area where I come from. I do this by a comparative look at how craft specializations happened in other parts of the African continent, an approach prompted by the absence of older written or documentary sources on KwaZulu-Natal, prior to the advent of European colonialism. A key finding of the research is that the cultural and ritual repertoires of craft specialists reveal conceptual domains of expertise that are derived from intra-African regional dynamics. This contrasts with the colonial belief that implied that notions of expertise were as a result of European or Asian human contacts. In looking at craft guilds, I am interested in how ritual, technological skill and the mastery of certain musical/creative acts played a part in the formation of regional blocs in ancient Africa. Such a historical understanding may be crucial to our present-day understanding of emergent processes of regionalization and identity formation.

KEYWORDS Africa, colonialism, craft, migration, music, myth, performance, ritual, ubunyanga

From a formalistic point of view, it is hard to conceive of philosophy in its systematic form in pre-literate societies. Substantively, it is equally hard to imagine peoples without some conception of, or ideas about the meaning of existence, notion of being and its imperative/logic, and the purpose of mankind in the universe.[1]

Introduction

The aim of the research in this paper is to situate the historical musical and cultural practices of the province of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) into a wider regional and continental viewpoint in the precolonial era.[2] Such a task is not easy because (1) most writerly and documentary activities on the area took place in the nineteenth century, that is after the colonial encounter; (2) the long intellectual isolationism of South Africa during the apartheid years meant that it was largely excluded from debates around regional identities and mobilities prior to colonialism, which have sustained inquiry in other regions such as West Africa and East Africa.

In my archival fieldwork, I found the notion of *ubunyanga*, a complex category which seems to have, at one time in history, designated a variety of skills in KwaZulu-Natal, including stonemasonry, metallurgy, music composition, healing, and thunder herding. This helped me to map out a conceptual field on which one could place craft specialization as an indigenous mode of professionalization and knowledge-making. I, later, discovered that there were similar collectives of craft specialists located in different parts of the African continent, such as the Congo basin, West Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, to mention a few. Craft groups seemed to be united not so much by questions of polity but rather those of expertise and skill, either in metalworking, music composition, hunting, healing arts, and others.

Following this observation from my research, I launched a series of performative and writerly meditations on the relationship of ritual, technological skill and mastery of musical/creative acts. One of the musical mediations to emerge was a work called “Indlela eBheke eAzania” (the road to Azania), which tried to reimagine a journey undertaken by traders and crafts people from KwaZulu-Natal to the Swahili coast in east Africa, in past centuries.[3] Another creative work I created is called “Sebenza Insimbi” (working the iron), which combines electronic sound composition and body movement in silhouette. This work retrieves the

reclusive practices of metalworkers, who were required to erect their furnaces next wooded areas for fuel purposes. They also used musical codes to mark analogical relationships between iron bloom production and fertility rites.[4]

Figure 1. Indlela ebheke e-Azania (“Voyage vers Azania”), a musical work in three parts, based on a historical African legacy, created by the author.

The current article expands on this growing *oeuvre* meditating on craft production, by a special focus on intra-Africa migrations and regional mobilities, looking at the movements as particular ways of convening African publics across time and space, and in ways that do not imply monolithicism in terms of ideas generated and deliberated on the continent. In this way, the work also deviates from a tendency to overemphasize the emergence of innovation in Africa because of human contacts with either Europe or Asia.

A key observation of this article is that cultures of technological, ritual and performative mastery figure prominently in various regional contexts on the African continent. Some of the convergences in technological production and mythmaking tells of the possibility of intra-regional mobilities happening at the nexus of expertise and possession of ethereal capabilities. The conceptual similarities across regions may not "prove" to us a prehistoric unity among the speakers of those respective languages (BaKongo, Zulu, Shona, Fipa, etc.), as has been the tendency to imply in the theories of Bantu expansionism. These similarities do, however, imply that there was sharing of information between producers of those crafts that had to have emerged through migration or travel. Such movements supported practices for expert knowledge preservation and sharing.

The specific question for this paper is how do we integrate far older views on land and belonging (and the concomitant question of being "First People") into the conversations we are having today about African ecologies—conversations which also tend to victimize and trivialize those with the strongest case of being the "First People"? It seems as though being "First People" always intimidates those who are new arrivals, who are also looking to make claims to the land. What they usually then try to do is disremember the histories and connections of those who came before.

I present here a comparative study of precolonial craft specialists in Africa.[5] Such a study demonstrates how technological skill and mastery of ritual were influential in the formation of regional blocs in ancient Africa. This may assist our present-day understanding of emergent processes of regionalization, as discussions unfold about (a) the creation of an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as part of the African Union's Agenda 2063, and (b) the ongoing attempt to reconceptualize regional blocs, as seen in the attempt to establish a single currency in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Bantu Expansionism

In discussions of the spread of iron craft skill in Africa, the linguistic hypothesis of the "Bantu" is often invoked. The term "Bantu" is a Zulu word meaning people. It has been used as a loanword in English for certain nefarious reasons.[6] The most elaborate use of the term has been to denote an original language supposedly spoken by the ancestors of many of Africa's populations today. The reasons that "Bantu" is used as the term for the so-called original language are purely coincidental rather than systematically-derived. An early use of the term appeared in *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* by Wilhelm Bleek, who as ethnologist studied the *-ntu* root, observable in many languages of Africa. He began to speculate about the commonality it implied; that it could in fact suggest a primordial unity between the speakers of such languages.[7]

The term was also taken up in the establishment of area studies at universities; when in the 1920s departments of Bantu Studies began to emerge at universities such as Cape Town and the Witwatersrand. The emphasis on ethnological and philological observations in Bantu Studies gave to the term Bantu a kind of scientific legitimacy. It is this genealogy of the term that was absorbed into the field of historico-linguistics. Scholars such as Harry Johnson in the 1920s, Malcolm Guthrie in the 1960s, and Jan Vansina in the 1980s began to suggest that the migrations and territorial movements of proto-Bantu resulted in the distribution of a people over the continent with a linguistic uniformity/similarity/commonality. The linguistic commonality is believed to have paved the way for the dissemination of a set of peculiar ways of organizing living and using technologies, which include (1)the introduction of social formations which were centralized, with elders as advisors, etc., (2) the domestic keeping of animals as trade value and food supply, (3) elevated importance of cattle, (4) formalized agricultural methods, (5) knowledge of high-temperature chemical reactions (metal production and ceramic-making).

As the story goes, the skills were moving with the people as they migrated from the west to east, and then gradually south. Scholars have many dissenting views on the theory. Malcolm Guthrie was first to suggest the split between western and eastern branches of Bantu.[8] Guthrie's work was unique in its level of detail. It was based on a comparison of over 3000 words in nearly 200 Bantu languages. What he discovered was that there were about 2300 common word roots, with a significant geographic distribution. There were over 500 general roots found throughout the area where Bantu languages are spoken. Out of the 2300 root words, 400 were identified as belonging to the eastern branch, and about 250 appeared only in the western speaking branches.[9] Bantu expansionism was then taken up by Roland Oliver, who emphasized the idea of Bantu coming to invade the areas of autochthones such as the Hadza in Tanzania and the Khoi in the Cape. He wrote, "it is the cultivating Bantu who move in and absorb the representatives of older and less successful cultures."[10].

The advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, led linguists to return to the method of lexicostatistics. The method was then also taken up by Jan Vansina, as a historian rather than as a linguist.[11] Drawing from Guthrie, Vansina added aspects of historico-linguistics, that is lexicostatistics and glotto-chronology. Indeed, the history of words became of elevated importance, over and above their basic meaning: words were cartographed in order to make certain assertions about the movements of people and their technological innovations.

Although this article does not intend to be a detailed discussion and criticism of Bantu expansionism, I felt it necessary to discuss the theory. What is important to mention is that this is certainly not the only scholarly debate on using language as a tool for understanding culture and history. Another important debate occurs in the field of African philosophy, as debated by scholars such as Alexis Kagame, D. A. Masolo, Paulin Hountondji and others. The lexicostatistical argument (advocated mainly by historians) could benefit from the deep theorizations emanating from African philosophy. A recurring critique emerging from the field of

African philosophy has been on the question of the *a priori* of language. Masolo has argued that although philosophy is concerned with the *a priori*, the idea of the *a priori* of language is in many ways problematic. This is because language is perhaps one of the most responsive elements of culture, to social and geographic changes.[12]

My own approach, therefore, takes Bantu expansionism as simply a narrativization of African movements, which is open to exploration and interrogation. But it is merely one way—and not the only way—of apprehending historical phenomena on the continent. I agree with Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo's viewpoint, who criticizes the Bantu expansionism theory, claiming that since 1962 the linguistic evidence has had an over-determining influence in the reconstruction of the origin of African peoples. He argues that too often the genetic relationship between languages is emphasized, over other types of transformation and contact, including internal dynamics.[13] Furthermore, such a focus by historico-linguists on the atomic level of language tends to obfuscate other inherent patterns that are more legible at a conceptual rather than at an atomic level. The reason for me saying so is that the kinds of assemblages around crafts, as offered in this paper, uncover interlocking concepts across regions which were prompted by fields of expertise. These tend to become concealed when one is dealing with language simply at the atomic level as historico-linguistics does. At the conceptual level, comparing myths can reveal similar ways of approaching phenomena across regions, which can be useful at elucidating local and inter-regional ideas.

Myth

Before getting into a specific discussion on ideas generated around crafts, it would be good to get into a brief discussion of myth, its status and general value in the apprehension of the world by human beings. My thinking on myth is informed by deliberations emanating from African philosophy and, to some extent,

anthropology. There are many ways in which people deepen their understanding of their present situation by drawing on the past. One major way certainly is through history, but there are other possibilities, including myth and philosophy, which demonstrate a wider field of memory not canalized in intentional history writing—something that is more sedimented in the stories that people tell about themselves, who they are, where they come from.[14] One of the hallmarks of myth is its reliance on the biographical mode, due to the centrality of human actions (anthropocentricism) in the stories conveyed, even objects or animals may be assigned humanly qualities in the unfolding of myths. Because of the biographical nature of myth, in societies there are major myths of origin, accounts of how people arrived, or of the beginning of time. Such myths depict a moment of order in nature, and then announce a variation which threatens to disrupt that order. The fault is explained together with its causes, in a way that reveals the possibility of human will and intervention for the restoration of order. Ritual becomes a tool through which the correction and restoration of order is rationalized.[15]

The intention to mould and overcome the obstacles of the environment and forces of nature is prevalent in the founding myths of societies. Threats of nature in KwaZulu-Natal, for instance, are those of thunder and lightning,[16] those of seasonal drought in the highlands of Zimbabwe, and insect disease in the low-lying areas on the south-east of the continent. Whether it is the deity who falls from the sky, or the story of the lizards who interact at the beginning of the world, what is apparent is that (1) nature is viewed as consistent/dependable, and (2) myth then anticipates a strategic action on the part of the human to sustain that balance.[17] Orderliness is produced in myth through the idea of genesis or creation, viewed as an intervention in absolute chaos, sometimes expressed as barrenness or infertility in African myths (especially those related to craft skills like metalwork). Creation thus becomes an induction of nature, to teach it to yield to human development needs.

If we are to use the biblical account as an example, a paradox arises in the scene of paradise, for although recalled as pristine and orderly, it is in paradise that the sudden realization of one's nakedness occurs. This is the humiliation which initiates man's quest to overcome this imperfection. This possibility to overcome is the optimism that myth uses to transform the human situation. Myth as a genre universalizes, by not being held to time and space, but at the same time the cause of its dilemma is specific, local, and/or historical. The universal element is in the relatability of the effects (both physical or metaphysical) to a variety of people.[18] In this way, it can be freed from the limitations of time and space, without detracting on its impression on its receivers.

Levi-Strauss has contributed immensely to the scholarship of myth. What is important about Levi-Strauss's contribution is expressed in the analogy of the woodpecker. Commenting on the myth which recounts that the touch of the woodpecker's beak cures a toothache, Levi-Strauss suggests that it is not a question of the factuality of the statement, but rather a prompt to imagine a possibility where a woodpecker and a person's tooth can be understood together, as having a kind of congruity—which may indeed have therapeutic results, as well as a variety of other social or psychic results.[19] Mythical thought expresses itself in ways we may consider assorted (or mix-masala) in terms of its repertoire. Notwithstanding this assortment, the choice is rather limited.[20] Myth is compelled to use this limited repertoire, in whatever creative means, as it has nothing else to draw from. Levi-Strauss continues:

Mythical thought, that 'bricoleur', builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events, while science, 'in operation' simply by virtue of coming into being, creates its means and results in the form of events, thanks to the structures which it is constantly elaborating and which are its hypotheses and theories. But it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these are two stages or phases in the evolution of knowledge.[21]

Like the bricoleur who is a master of making do with whatever is available, so is mythical thought. Its frame of reference is closed, yet the materials themselves may be heterogenous in variety. One can think of the medicine compartments in the furnaces of iron smelts, for instance. In many cultures the medicine pit was usually located inside a furnace, at the base. Here were concealed amulets, charms, bone, precious stones, hide, and sacred plants. Some of this material could partake significantly in the chemical reaction, such as bone which acted as a flux, thus lowering the boiling point of iron.[22] Other material performed a purely symbolic function; however, these were not distinguished in a hierarchy of significance as they existed in the heterogeneity of myth. Mythical thought concerns itself with the assortment of oddments collected from previous human expression.[23] What you have in the end is an outcome whose approach is the same for all occasions, enriched by repetition and variation.

Prevalence of Craft Groups

Although craft specialists seem to be a relatively understudied area in southern African studies, in other regions such as in west Africa and east Africa the field is somewhat more developed, with both ethnographic and archaeological choices considered, as well as the revisionist work based on Arabic manuscripts (e.g., *Ta'rikh al-Fattash*). In the literature on craft specialists, they appear in certain contexts as guilds, in other contexts as castes, and in others as social pariahs altogether—exempt from state authority, viewed as spiritual authority, but providing technological innovation (of high-temperature technologies, etc.). Their innovation allows them to operate across regional authorities and seems to offer a different discursive space than what has been imagined in the outmoded notions of "tribe" or "clan." And with these alternative discursive spaces, there must have been a range of ideas and concepts, which were not simply absorbed in the communal apparatus.[24]

The articulation of such an alternative space cannot be presumed *a priori* based on the perceived value of craft technologies. It would need to be gleaned from the structural and metaphysical layout informing artisanship within those societies, where technical aspects are inseparable from the rituals and social roles assigned to those individuals, where obligations to nature and wildlife (as exemplified in the role of the *bisimbi* in the Congo and other areas) are of equal importance as obligations to rulers and ancestors.

The areas of expertise were similar across different regions, such as healing through plants, divination, metalworking, masterful (griots)storytelling, music, and poetry, to mention a few. According to Tal Tamari such similar "endogamous" specialist groups of musicians and artisans are notable amongst the Manding-speaking populations (including Bambara), the Dogon, Songhay, Wolof, Fulani, and Tuareg, among others.[25] One of the arguments made by Tamari is that such specialist groups emerged because of migration movements of populations; this is confirmed in clan names and in the distribution of musical gifts.[26] Her evidence suggests that "endogamous ranked specialist groups" were present in west Africa by the year 1300 AD. They were usually a small percentage of the population, never in the majority and could not be enslaved. Some of the most common vocations in west African specialist groups were metal-working, music-making and storytelling, leatherworking, woodworking, weaving, and calabash repair.

What is important from an artistic performance point of view is that the specialist groups had their own repertories of song, epic poetry, and gesture (dance) which distinguished their repertoire to that of ordinary folk. Bards had their own magical stories to tell, uncommon to the rumor-mongering and guesswork of the general population. Families known as specialists in jewellery designing distinguished themselves from regular smiths. For example, for the Senufo, certain metalworkers had the right to work only black metal (iron), whilst others were allowed to work the "red" and "white" metals (like copper, brass).[27] Similar observations have been made with regards to nineteenth-century KwaZulu-Natal

in relation to the jewelry-making at the capital of Dingane, uMgungundlovu. According to reports on the Zulu capital, the master smith responsible for designing the royal investiture and military emblems was not allowed to work on the rare metal of *ithusi elimhlophe kanye nelibomvu* (white and red copper, bronze) at his own homesteads, but was rather expected to work over a few days in the specially designated hut next to Dingane's apartment.[28]

In terms of woodwork, ancient mystery trees, where dwells *bisimbi* (nature spirits), and the output of these trees was restricted to special crafters, to build only the superior stools, ornaments, or musical instruments. In the Sunjata (Sundiata) epics of the Manding, there is a report of Sumanguru Kante who was an iron crafter and whose source of mystical power was a musical xylophone, which no one was entitled to play. Esteemed crafters served kings and chiefs as advisors and messengers, and they were expected to conform to certain avoidances. In terms of the historical reasons for the craft specialist social formation, Tamari says,

Thus, it seems that castes may have originated in interclan alliances contracted in conditions of extreme inequality. With time, these relationships, which may have initially bound the 'bards' and 'blacksmiths' only to the leading Manding clans, and their major correlates—exclusion from political office and a prohibition on inter-marriage—may have been generalized, creating endogamous, politically subordinate groups.[29]

From a southern perspective, one can imagine that groups of specialists themselves migrated eastwards and southwards, in search for better conditions. Upon arriving in new destinations, they localized, and adapted for new markets for their craft. Given the fact that craft productions have existed on the African continent for a very long time (even prior to Arab and later European invasions) they provide a different corpus from which ideas on regionalization and boundary-making can be considered.

Crafts in Relation to Metal Technology

Studies of technology reveal that how communities and individuals engage with technologies is a conscious choice that may reflect understandings of the social order, and spiritual and astronomical ideas of origin.[30] Technologies are also a result of geomorphic histories, for example the high level of interest in iron smelting and somewhat lesser interest in copper smelting in KwaZulu-Natal is a decision based on availability of raw materials. The geomorphological structure of the region did not allow for an abundance of copper ore. Most importantly, technologies arise because of political, pecuniary, and environmental reasons. As kingdoms fall, and new people arrive, as others move due to drought conditions or fleeing the frequency of lightning and thunderstorms (as they happen so regularly in KwaZulu-Natal), they desire ways and means of overcoming those obstacles. Technologies offer tools, whether real or imagined, for making their situations more liveable.

Studies of technology also lend themselves to a comparative framework of investigation since the elementary process of metal production are similar: they require both skill and physical work, access to forest (for fire), raw materials, tolerance for high heat, etc. However, the beliefs and enactments that accompany processes of metallurgical production differed from region to region, district to district. The social placement of metallurgy also differed, whereas in some instances metal crafters were regarded as outlying clans, sometimes they were closely allied with ruling powers, for example.

Iron making techniques were frequently combined with skills in music, medicine, divination, and storytelling. Whether one is talking of Shona, Zulu, or Luba, there is a remarkable semblance in the repertoire of terms involved in myths surrounding the crafts of divination, metal, and music. The continuities in language may not “prove” to us a primordial unity between the speakers of such languages, but what it does convey is an interconnection between the producers

of those crafts which had to have developed through travel/migration. Such movements promoted processes of sharing and preserving expert knowledge.

One must remember that the centrality of iron crafts in other productive acts, such as warfare, agriculture, hunting, fertility, and medicine, and the fact that it also required a large amount of raw material in terms of wood and ore, meant that it was always susceptible to political influence and was responsive to regional dynamics of control. In terms of ecological consequences, there is a sense that the expansion of crafts such as ironworking had a devastating impact on the ecology of the Congo basin, as it led to a lot of deforestation of trees used as fuel. During the slave trade, iron crafting guilds in West Africa were associated with slave trading; their labor was now defined by the elites, who controlled the networks of human trafficking. They made swords, javelins, axes, clubs, and spears for war. In tropical Africa, there is evidence of African smelters refining valuable commodities, with their minds set on both local and overseas markets.[31]

That there is a connection between metal production and myth in Africa is undoubtable.[32] In west Africa, the Hausa attributed iron crafting to a specific clan called the Asna. They did not live with everyone in the homesteads, rather they chose the holes in rocks and caves as their dwelling places. The founding myth of the Asna was that of a lady called Lola. Lola fell from the sky; she fell holding a hammer in one hand and a spoon full of food in the other hand. Lola had a reputation; she was known for being able to handle red-hot iron without burning. If an ironworker made her angry, Lola would take the hot iron off the forges. Musics, storytelling, and ironwork were the range of crafts performed by the Asna.

Those born in a family of iron crafters, became iron crafters themselves. Techniques, ritual, and medicine were used to convey the hereditary importance of the craft. There were versions of stories that said sons of women from iron crafting clans became bards and storytellers. Iron making techniques were

frequently combined with skills in music, medicine, divination, and storytelling. The image of the pregnant woman featured through smelting processes (such as in the shape of the furnace in other parts of the continent). The season for smelting began when it was full-moon and would end before the next moon appeared (about ten days). The lead iron crafter would prepare the smelting camp by aligning with the points of the stars as well as considerations of the organization of the village.[33]

In the Asna (Hausa) smeltings, the lead crafter would sprinkle medicines on the furnace, this was done delicately in circular movement. In between the sprinkling, the lead crafter would gesture some swirling movements, a kind of insemination of the ore, which is to enter the woman (the furnace), only then to emerge, new born, as iron. The words and gestures reflected a sexual comparison of the procedure to the act of intercourse. While the metalworker enacts his part of the ceremony, the storytellers and musicians would sing songs with sexual innuendo. There are a variety of sexual restrictions and beliefs about procreation. Women who touched a musician's instruments could lose a pregnancy or go through a period of barrenness. They believed that the poetry and songs assisted the furnace in its conception. The metalworker also had to appease the small creature (what in Zulu is called "tokoloshe," which can be compared to a genie in Arabian mythology). The creature is believed to live in the fields. Failure to appease the creature may result in them taking the life of one of the metalworker's family members. The knowledge about their crafts was carefully guarded and protected. In Hausa beliefs, metalworkers were associated with the protection of newborn babies. The metalworker could utter truths specific to the moment or make predictions about the future by reading the flow of the slag.[34]

Ubunyanga as Discussed in the South

Most of the information available about crafts of *ubunyanga* in KwaZulu-Natal comes from the missionary writings of the colonial period (in the nineteenth century). The elevated status of crafters and rituals gnosis were both abominable and fascinating for missionaries.[35] I have elsewhere argued that the missionaries emphasized the aspect of *ubunyanga* which pertained to divination and belief, as it is this that they wished to understand, and not political discourse or trade routes as such.[36] They believed that in understanding African custom and belief, they could find a way of explaining religious concepts to African congregations. So key to their interpretation of *ubunyanga* was a quest to find a language that would explain Christian ideas to African audiences. The language was drawn from the repertoire of myths, proverbs and spiritualities of local people, the *ubunyanga* complex was seen as significant in the corpus of thoughts by which Judeo-Christian religious ideas could be conveyed. The accumulation of concepts happened also amid missionary rivalries, as one missionary society aimed to surpass another in terms of congregation numbers, educational attendance, the ability to be at the cutting-edge of reproduction technologies such as a printing press, etc. Terms were forged, adapted, and contested—the vocabularization process was at the heart of some of the fiercest rivalries.[37]

Missionaries in Natal, such as John William Colenso and Henry Callaway, saw in the concept of *ubunyanga*, and the myths and repertories that accompany it, a resource which could be used in establishing a localized religious discourse in Zulu. Colenso spent a considerable amount of time in his early years (1850s) in KwaZulu-Natal interviewing informed people and clan leaders on the meaning of the term God in Zulu. As time went on he became very interested in the concept of *ubunyanga*, which he saw as an important vehicle to understanding precolonial views on belief and spirituality. Colenso's sense that *ubunyanga* was an important conceptual field is attested to by the detailed entry he gives to the term in his

dictionary. In Colenso's Zulu-English Dictionary (1861) the entry of the term "nyanga" is defined as follows:

Nyanga, v. Form by skill.

Nyanga, (In), n. Moon, month; clever person, one skilled in any part or business; particularly one skilled in medicine, a doctor (eyokwelapha).

innyanga yokubula=isanusi

innyanaga yokuqamba, a composer of songs

innyanga yokukanda insimb; a blacksmith

innyanga yokusebenz'amatshe, a stonemason

Nyanga (Ubu), n. skill in medicine; skill of any kind.[38]

Arriving a few years after Colenso, Callaway seemed to follow in his footsteps. He too became invested in the conceptual field of *ubunyanga* and went on to produce a book called *Religious System of the Amazulu* (1870). The book is a compilation of statements on what *ubunyanga* was, as obtained from a group of respondents/interlocutors. Let me say that in the testimonies given by the respondents in Callaway's book, there is a sense that the people to whom he spoke did not come from one area, but many came from different parts of the region between the rivers of Umzimkulu and Phongola. The explanations by the interlocutors are characterized by a general plurality. They are each peculiar, location-specific, as many respondents emphasized that their observation were based on one or two particular incidents, and not on widely-seen phenomena. A recurring methodological problem in the text is that some of the people interviewed were trying to recall things they last saw a long time ago. What is also true is that very few of the responses claimed to be first-hand accounts, given by an *inyanga* (or former *inyanga*). The people discussing were seldom (self-

confessed) initiates of the craft guilds, in a way that would give them a sense of the inner working of the craft. This probably had to do with the religious context in which Callaway and others encountered the informants.

The other segment of evidence pertaining to the practices of *ubunyanga* comes from a different archive. That is the archive of archaeological excavation. The material objects of excavations are able to tell us about metalworking sites of iron crafters and possibly the practices of stonemasonry. One of the things that emerges from this evidence is that the production of iron tended to be focused on particular areas, which served far wider, sometimes dispersed, recipient communities.[39] This was the work of *izinyanga zensimbi*. In the Callaway text mentioned above, *izinyanga zensimbi* are only cursorily mentioned. This could be because of a fairly limited sample of personal accounts, in terms of regional scope, used in the book. The fact that archaeological evidence reveals that metalwork tended to be focused in particular areas, may explain why it could be overlooked in terms of the sample of population he had at his to interview. Another explanation for the cursorily discussion of metallurgy could be that, as is the case elsewhere on the continent, that European observers tended to be more intrigued by rituals and myths than the technological processes of metal production.[40] This may be an exaggeration, but what is true is that the missionaries often lacked the technological know-how to allow them to ask the right questions about metallurgical processing.

Walter Cline's 1937 book is an important text; it compiled all the early reports on metal production into a single volume, the title of which is *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa*. Cline suggested that different regions in sub-Saharan Africa exhibited different views on the status of the metal crafter. In some areas they were feared and seen as a sacred community, like in West Africa. In the Congo, Forest Cline suggested that iron crafters were organized into guilds. They placed a lot of emphasis on ritual, and divination played an important part. Copper reserves are few and far between in sub-Saharan Africa. Iron, on the other hand,

is pervasive, revealed not only in its application but also, crucially, in the elaborateness of myths that surround iron. A few general characteristics found everywhere are, first, the personification of different implements in the metal-working process; second, the idea of metal production being a secret or mystical process; third, the exclusivity of metal production, the idea of smelting being performed by select families or clans.

Ironworking communities protected the knowledge that was both practical (artisanal) and ritual related.[41] An investigation of iron craft practice therefore demands keen observation of the myths, within which are encapsulated explanations about success or failure. This is important, as Louise Iles and Edwinus Lyaya note, iron production "is a resource-hungry and time-hungry technology that runs a high risk of failure."[42] After a poor smelt, for example, in KwaZulu-Natal it may have been said, "That nyanga did not eat enough impepho (African sage)."[43] In other places, a poor smelt may be blamed on the breaking of sexual and relational taboos. Rituals and myth surrounding the activities of metal production, are revealed in the design features on the tuyeres, bellows, medicines, and furnaces, and in the repertoire of song and dance which accompany the smelting process.[44]

Common Characteristics of Iron Myth

In terms of the general characteristics of African myth surrounding iron, it seems common that the story of the origin of iron is pegged to some ruler or Great Ancestor or great smelter who then taught everybody else. Sometimes the ancestor is so recent (like three hundred years ago) as is the case with the Barundi and Buganda, who credit ironworking to the region of Bunyoro, which is known to be rich in ore deposits. There is a tale told by the Thonga about the people of Ndondondwane (in southern Mozambique). This clan, due to their lack of ironworking skill, their case was particularly a shame. They could not kill an

elephant and skin it and cut it to pieces for cooking; they therefore had to cook the elephant whole. Similarly, abakwaNtlozi, who lived on the lagoon at St. Lucia (northeast of South Africa) were said to have no iron by other neighboring clans. The people abakwaMbonambi, one of their neighbors but also well-known specialists in iron and great makers of spears, harassed abakwaNtlozi as a result.[45] What these kinds of stories say to me is not so much that one clan was inferior to others, but what it does suggest is that those with technological know-how understood this as power. They constructed myths about those without the know-how. In reality, however, tools and implements were shared, traded between clans within regions and across regions too.

The Fang, in Equatorial Guinea and southern Cameroon, say they got iron skill from the Tua. The Pangwe branch of the Fang claimed to know iron but admitted that the descendants of Ngomwenio were far better iron crafters. In the Congo basin, the Bushongo (which incorporates BaKuba, and others) say that iron skill was given by the Creator and passed on through their fourth emperor. This happened a long time ago, before they moved southward. The Basonge say that they were given iron by Efile Mokolu (the Great Ancestor) (or what Zulu-speakers may call uMvelinqangi).[46]

Efile=the dead

Mokulu= the Great/Deep-time (Ancient) [For example, mkhulu in Zulu, which means grandfather].

The BaNyemmezi traced iron to the brother of the great ancestor, King MaKalasinde. MaKalasinde's brother name was Zina, and he was the giver of iron, according to myth. Zambian communities of BaKaonde and BaTwa acknowledged Leza as the Creator and as the bringer of iron. The Creator gave ironworking skill to their earliest ancestors. According to some Sotho-Tswana origin myths, one of the earliest ancestors was Noto (hammer), who was the son of Morolong (the forger/sharpener). There was an account of Sotho speakers from Klein Letaba

whose story of origin says that they were created holding the instrument of the forge in their hands. And for the Barolong (who are the iron crafters) one of their totems is *tsipi* (literally iron). One of the clan praises talks about "the sons of the dancers of iron."[47]

The BaKongo Smiths | *Forgeron Consecrateur*

The Congo area, as a centrifugal point of migrations in sub-Saharan Africa, is renowned for the most diverse metalworking histories and is home to some of the continent's oldest iron smelting cultures. In terms of myths related to the origin of iron craft, the BaKongo believed that they learnt ironwork from communities in the north and eastwards of the basin.[48]

From a research point of view, the metallurgical tradition of the BaKongo offers an interesting case, due to extensive documentary reportage having taken place both in the fifteenth century and the early twentieth century. Here, Mani Vunda is the priest of metallurgical mastery. It is his authority that the master smith is seen to represent, he is endowed with priestly duties in relation to the ruler. The smith coronates the incoming ruler by leading him through an initiation of re-birth. This is the process which establishes him in his leadership role. Told in the royal rituals and ceremonies is the story of creation, linking metallurgy to royal ceremonies of coronation, metallurgy to the growth and fertility of the clan—the story of how they, the BaKongo, became powerful. Original inhabitants of the land were imagined having been half-people (short people), who possessed a high level of skill and dexterity of metal. They had a profound understanding or connection with the invisible world of *bisimbi*, the local spirits who appear through nature, who are the custodians of fertility and technology. The *bisimbi* also hold together the dimension of hierarchical spiritual entities, including spirits of the dead, nature

spirits. Some believed that the older the ancestor, the more likely they are to transform into nature spirits.[49]

Stories in the repertoire of myths which informed BaKongo communities talk about a past age of life where there was a wizard called Nzondo. Nzondo had one eye and one leg. He gave BaKongo the gift of a spear with no handle. The spear is a symbol for metal production, warfare, and power. One of the names given to the short people, who are the original inhabitants who worked metal, is the *mbaka*. Some of the stories suggest that the new arrivals who were agriculturalists overpowered the *mbaka* and drove them into the forest, where they went into hiding. The Mbanza were founded by a Ntinu Lukeni, whose name means "violent one". Ntinu Lukeni left his homeland seeing that he was the youngest of many brothers and was therefore unlikely to inherit much from his parents' estate. He then left home to find land. He arrived in the area and found people he could easily subdue under his own rule. The chief oracle was Nsaku ne Vunda who was a famous master of rainmaking, hunting, and agriculture. He himself was not a ruler, but whoever ruled could not rule without him. "Ehlala eduze kwasentabeni yokwehlukaniswa, lapho amakhosi egcotshwa khona" (Nsaku ne Vunda lived very close to the "Mountain of Separation," where the ancient kings were ordained in Zulu). He was a specialist in healing of psychic illnesses. Ntinu Lukeni, in his independent mindedness tried to sideline Nsaku ne Vunda in his ascendency. Ntinu Lukeni was then struck with madness, which was cured once he apologized for his mistake.[50]

In an eighteenth-century account of a Mani Vunda, he acted as the chief overseer of the *bisimbi* cult and the lead advisor to the king and one of the most important members of the royal council. By the centrality of the Mani Vunda's role in the investment of new kings, the myth of Nsaku ne Vunda's healing of Lukeni is replayed. The state of madness is interpreted as the general state of mankind, a state of misapprehension, as the incoming ruler imagines himself going through the "mountain of separation," he undergoes initiation to be cured of

misapprehension (or the lack of ruling wisdom) at the hands of the Nsaku ne Vunda, to be endowed, separated from the general kind of wisdom, to the wisdom of kings, which qualifies one for leadership. It sends a message to the public that leadership is not easily acquired, that there is a test to ruling. Thus, the story creates an impression on the young, something to be aspired to, an emblem in the imagination motivating them to commit to paths of service as a life choice.[51]

When a ruler dies, that is not ground for the election of a new ruler *per se*. The conditions for a new ruler are that a great calamity, drought, or such condition must first befall the people or land. The elders then call the diviner, who exhorts the villagers on royal election, reminds them of ancient principles, which if kept will bring order and balance in the life of the communities. In this context the metallurgist intervenes in the continuity of the kingly line, he also intervenes in the spirit realm. Once a candidate is identified, a smith officiates over the initiation; the smith under this state duty becomes what Mertens calls the *Forgeron Consecrateur* (the Consecrator-Forger).[52]

Nzundu—the smiths hammer/anvil

The process of selecting a suitable anvil, which must be a river stone, is part of the initiation of the smith. It becomes the *simbi* of his location. It does not move even when the smith moves. If he relocates, he searches for a new one and consecrates it for his new dwelling, a *simbi* of a new location. There is a connection between the spirits that dwell in the rocks on the rivers, the metalworker, and the king. It is the *Forgeron Consecrateur* who is the bridge between the king and the ancestral line. “The smith grants the king access to the ancestors of the royal line, to the nature spirits, and the autochthonous *Nsaku* clan from whom he claims descent.”[53]

Nyamakalaw of the Mande

In the Mande society, the tendency was for boys to be selected to become smiths at around ten years of age. They would then undergo tutelage and become disciples of the master crafter. The achievements related to the training were also musical; mastering how to get bellows pumping at appropriate rhythmic metre, they must learn songs—smithing songs. They also acquire some knowledge of healing and medicine, and woodwork, which is generally regarded as pre-training for ironworking.[54]

Before colonialism, Mande were primarily divided into three ranks: farmers and elders were the first group, specialized crafters were another group, and slaves were the third group. The first group remained influential; leaders came from this class. The group of crafters was called *nyamakalaw* the term can be broken down as follows:

- Nyama = life force, evil, omen, defilement
- Kala = make, handle, which may come from ke-la, to pick water, to funnel something. [in Zulu ke-la (khela) would be to pick water or a stick]

To give an overall definition of the term *nyamakalaw* is very difficult as all the explanations are influenced by the social position of those giving the statement; in the most basic level, they are people who hold monopoly on certain social acts. The group of crafters included storytellers, bards, leatherworkers, potters, etc. They played a vital role in the economic, religious and political cultures in the areas where they live. In Sudan the Mande ironworkers were kept as ambassadors, advisors, interpreters. The role of ironworkers was circumscribed in the social contract which existed between the noble clans and *nymakalaw*. There is a suggestion that some past alliance or treaty forbade the crafters from ascending to political power, in exchange for protection and autonomy. This relationship may have become naturalized over time. Another reason of importance in the ideological separation of crafters, is that practices such as iron

were associated with divine inspiration. There is a suggestion that this delicate position of divine inspiration required "liminality in kinship relations and social status."[55] One of the things the *nyamakalaw* are said to have is mastery over "nyama" and the knowledge of trees (jiridon). This is perceived to endow him with powers potentially destructive to the world. For the Mande, the griots and smelters are understood to share the power over *nyama* (life force) believed to be epitomized in spoken words and natural material. It has also been suggested that with the *nyamakalaw* they identify more with specialization than with the notion of ethnicity.

What Can We Learn for KwaZulu-Natal Craft Specialist of *Ubunyanga*

Well one thing I can say that what has been most arresting for me in the reviewing of the literature from other parts of the African continent is the mythical concept of the *bisimbi*, who are the nature and wild-life spirits, who are believed to dwell in trees, rocks, and other nature objects. In the section on BaKongo, I mentioned how the smelter was required to arrive at a new home and then consecrate a new *simbi*, which was a rock to be used as an anvil. It makes sense that the nature spirit dwelling in the object would be so emphasized that it needed to be consecrated. In Zulu/Xhosa the word we use for iron is *insimbi* or in Sotho *tsipi*. The relation of this word and the concept of *bisimbi* of the BaKongo is undoubtable. This may not suggest some possible primordial unity between the southern and African nations further north. But what it does indicate is the power and resilience of those concepts (both artisanal and mystical) and their movement across territories and epochs. A conclusion we can draw is that ironworking in Africa is a very old craft. And the fact that there is similarity and convergence in the mythical (and linguistic) concepts, over such a wide distance, suggests that

knowledge on African craft specialization was shared, over an unusually wide area.

But I wish to at some point to investigate the character of the short-person, the mythical figure called in Zulu *utokoloshe*/*umkhov*u, (a figure is evident in KwaZulu-Natal myths around healing, ironwork and is inferred in myths from other parts of the continent). The baKongo talk of the *mbaka*, while in other areas even the designation *bisimbi* can be used for these short creatures who assist in ironmaking and medicine. Sometimes the mythical figure of short-person is compared with the historical community of the baTua (Tua/twa literally meaning "bush people"), who are the forest dwelling people, short in stature. In Zulu/Xhosa when we talk of abathwa, we are also referring to Khoekhoe, San and other communities. So for me this tells me that term *abathwa* may have migrated southwards and become a designation of those who did not fit the agriculturalist mode of existence. Even in South Africa today, in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal you still find districts or communities widely known for their gifts in music to credit this knowledge from the fact that their ancestors had interacted and intermarried with "abathwa" in the past.

As a designation for communities-on-the-move, the term may then be an example of a social distinction going back to before the European colonial confrontation. What is important is that as communities arrived and declared other people "abathwa" they simultaneously were implying a separateness to their own identity, and perhaps this may be viewed in the same way as the ancient Romans who ruled over the Barbarian clans. The Romans had a poor opinion of Barbarians in terms of civilization and sophistication. People rule differently when they believe themselves to have superior technology, language, and cultural development. When we are prompted to investigate the sources of African identity, we may do well then to probe these kinds of longer confrontations as well. It is not a kind of regression or retribalization, but the aim is self-evaluative, to have a more comprehensive frame of how we got to the identities we have today. Expressions

of being “First People,” or the original inhabitants may have something to do with the claim of custody over certain mystical and technological processes, rather than genuine beliefs in ethnic purity. The convergence of such territorial claims with technological mastery shows us that the formation of regional identities was informed by notions of expertise rather than beliefs in racial types. We would do well to keep this in mind in the assessment of African identities today. An increasingly interconnected African continent, in the context of an integrated global, requires a dynamic perspective.

Notes

1. Archie Mafeje, *In Search of an Alternative: A Collection of Essays on Revolutionary Theory and Politics* (Harare: Sapes Books, 1992), 1. ↩

2. This paper was inspired by my involvement in the project “Recentring AfroAsia: Musical and Human Migrations in the precolonial period 700–1500 AD.” The project, hosted at the University of Cape Town, involved a number of universities in Africa and India. I had set it up as my task to investigate activities in KwaZulu-Natal, a province on the east coast of South Africa, which is where I come from. Historically, the area was occupied by diverse populations speaking closely related languages broadly recognized as “khuluma” and “thefula” speeches; today, however, due to colonial, technological and lexicographic transformations the language that dominates in KwaZulu-Natal is isiZulu, which is but one language fitting under the broader categories. See Thokozani Mhlambi, “African Pioneer: K. E. Masinga and the Zulu ‘Radio Voice’ in the 1940s,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 26, no. 2 (2019): 210–230. Also see the research project website for more information: “Re-centring AfroAsia: Musical and Human Migrations in the Precolonial Period 700–1500 AD,” University of Cape Town, accessed 15 April 2023, http://www.afroasia.uct.ac.za/. ↩

3. The work was broadcasted through a collaboration that involved Afropolitan Explosiv in KwaZulu-Natal, Cité International des Arts in Paris, Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and the Recentring AfroAsia Migrations project at the University of Cape Town. ↩

4. The work has been showcased in Tunis in Tunisia, Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg all in South Africa. ↩

5. Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991) 221-250. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700025718 < https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700025718> ; J. O. Vogel, “Foreword,” in *Ancient African Metallurgy: The Sociocultural Context*, ed. M. S. Bisson, S. T. Childs, P. de Barros, and A. Holl (Oklahoma: Walnut Creek, 2000), xiii–xviii; Sandra Blakely, *Myth,*

Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Nefarious reasons include the division of human varieties into racial types, the elaboration of state-led ethnic divisions, culminating in what became known as Bantu development policy in the 1950s under apartheid.

7. W. H. I. Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* (London: Trübner & Co, 1862). Also see Raymond O. Silverstein, "A Note on the Term "Bantu" as First Used by W. H. I. Bleek," *African Studies* 27, no. 4 (1968): 211–212.

8. Malcolm Guthrie (1962 & 1963)

9. Christopher Ehret, "Bantu Expansions: Re-Envisioning a Central Problem of Early African History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34, no. 1 (2001): 10.

10. Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1966): 371.

11. Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, I," *History in Africa* 6 (1979): 287–333; Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, II," *History in Africa* 7 (1980): 293–325; Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

12. D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100.

13. Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyigo, "The Bantu Problem Reconsidered," *Current Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (June 1976): 283.

14. W. Emmanuel Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), 57.

15. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 41–42.

16. Adrian Koopman, "Lightning Birds and Thunder Trees," *Natalia* 41 (2011): 40–60.

17. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 41.

18. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 46–47.

19. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 9.

20. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 16.

21. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 22.

22. Walter Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa* (Menasha, WI: George Banta Publishing Company, 1937), 19. ↩

23. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 17, 19. ↩

24. Writing on Akan language and practices, Gyekye has criticized the tendency to view traditions of African thought in ways that are not individuated/pluralistic:

    A communal society can produce only communal (collective) thought. Because the communal society, it is alleged, does many (if not all) things together, it must therefore also 'think' together and think the same thought. This kind of reasoning assumes that individuality is completely absorbed in the communal apparatus.

    Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). ↩

25. Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991): 221–224. ↩

26. The reader will note here that many of the communities mentioned here are not even considered as part of the Bantu group, and yet there exist remarkable conceptual and practical resemblance in the convening of spaces of technological and mythical work. ↩

27. Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 223–224. ↩

28. Discussed in "Uhambo lease Mgungundlovu" (Voyage to uMgungundlovu), Presented at the Archive & Public Culture Research Workshop, University of Cape Town, 8–10 November 2023. ↩

29. Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 239. ↩

30. Thokozani N. Mhlambi, "Sound in Urban Public Space: Loudspeaker Broadcasts in Johannesburg and Durban in South Africa, 1940s," *Cultural Studies* 35 (Feb 2020): 959–978. ↩

31. "Africa and its metalworkers appear always to have been part of a world system." J. O. Vogel, "Foreword," in *Ancient African Metallurgy: The Sociocultural Context*, ed. M. S. Bisson, S. T. Childs, P. de Barros, and A. Holl (Oklahoma: Walnut Creek, 2000), xiii–xviii. ↩

32. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy*, 2. ↩

33. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy,* 2–3. ↩

34. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 3–4. ↩

35. See Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 64. ↩

36. Thokozani N. Mhlambi, "Izinyanga: Disappearance and Re-emergence" (unpublished manuscript, November 2021). ↩

37. See David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996). ↩

38. John W Colenso, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Pietermaritzburg: P Davis, 1861). ↩

39. T. Maggs, "'My Father's Hammer Never Ceased Its Song Day and Night': the Zulu Ferrous Metalworking Industry," *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 4 (1992): 65–67. ↩

40. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 64. ↩

41. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 172. ↩

42. Louise Iles and Edwinu Lyaya, "Making Metals in East Africa and Beyond: Archaeometallurgy in *Azania*, 1966–2015," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa,* 50, no. 4 (2015). ↩

43. See Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (Cape Town: C Struik Publishers, 1870). ↩

44. Iles and Lyaya, "Making Metals in East Africa and Beyond," 482. ↩

45. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 22, 23. ↩

46. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 23. ↩

47. Z. K. Matthews, "A Short History of the Tshidi Barolong," *Fort Hare Papers,* A2.42, June 1945, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Africa. ↩

48. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 22, 23. ↩

49. Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 138. ↩

50. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 181–183. ↩

51. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power*, 139–140. ↩

52. Joseph Mertens, *Les Chefs couronnés des Bakongo orientaux* (Brussels, 1942). See also Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power,* 136–137. ↩

53. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 187. ↩

54. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 172–175. ↩

55. David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nymakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). ↩

Author Information

Thokozani N Mhlambi

Thokozani Ndumiso Mhlambi, a musician, songwriter, and cultural pioneer, was born in South Africa on September 18, 1984. Mhlambi became well-known for his concert-lecture performances, which he began doing in 2016 at the Mazisi Kunene Museum in Durban. For the performance at the museum, Mhlambi was nominated for the National Institute for Humanities and Social Science Creative Prize in 2018. Mhlambi has created his own distinctive presentations that blend engaging performances with critical thought. He frequently does solo concerts on his baroque cello and vocals on stage. He frequently works with orchestras and groups in North America and Europe. Mhlambi is a cultural thinker who has a strong sense of community and how the local and global connect. He builds artistic visions using an internationalist methodology, which is inspired by the ground-breaking work of Pan-African philosophers like C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, H. I. E. Dhlomo, and Paulo Freire. Mhlambi's creative influences come from those who created the tradition of African anthems, such as Reuben Caluza, Ntsikana, John Knox Bokwe, and Enoch Sontonga, to name a few. These individuals modernized tradition in the same way that the Ancient Greeks did by creating an ethos of mousike. He draws inspiration from folk musics from throughout the world to develop his own unique style.

View all of Thokozani N Mhlambi's articles.

Article details

Thokozani N Mhlambi, "Regional Mobilities, Technology and the status of Myth in Africa: Retrieving Musical/Creative Codes in KwaZulu-Natal before Colonialism," *Lateral* 12.2 (2023).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.2.2

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053